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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the level of academic coping skills being employed by 59 college-bound high school students with learning disabilities (LD), assessed the college-related expectations of these students, and compared these skills and expectations with those identified as essential by successful college students with learning disabilities. Administration of a high school modification of the College Student Experience Questionnaire and another questionnaire revealed that: (1) approximately 85 percent of the students expected to use at least one type of ancillary service, such as extended time for tests, tape recorded lectures, and personal help from faculty; (2) subjects initiated few contacts with faculty outside the classroom and over 50 percent had never talked with a counselor; (3) many students did not apply consistent study techniques such as outlining, underlining major points, or reading supplementary materials; (4) papers were frequently written without the aid of a style manual, dictionary, or thesaurus; (5) students anticipated academic problems in college, most commonly in reading, mathematics, and English; and (6) while successful college students consistently stressed the importance of putting forth extra effort, high school students were not consistently doing so. Implications for the development of college preparatory courses for LD students are outlined. (Contains 12 references.) (JDD)

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# Academic Coping Skills and College Expectations of Learning Disabled High School Students

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Academic Coping Skills and College Expectations in Learning Disabled High School Students

Between 1978 and 1985, the proportion of learning disabled students entering college as full-time freshmen increased threefold (Vogel & Adelman, 1993). The recent interest in postsecondary school options for learning disabled adolescents has resulted in a proliferation of special programs at colleges and universities. However, "despite the increased emphasis by federal and state policy makers, educators and parents on the transition period between high school and adulthood, little is known about the participation of youth with disabilities in postsecondary education" (Fairweather & Shaver, 1991, p. 264).

Although most professionals recognize the need for a systematic transition plan for college-bound students with learning disabilities, researchers report the existence of markedly dissimilar views regarding the competencies important for college entry and success (Seidenberg and Koenigsberg 1990). While the focus of previous investigations has been on learning disabled students enrolled in college, few studies have been conducted on the skills of learning disabled high school students seeking college admission.

The purpose of this study was threefold: to assess the level of academic coping skills being employed by college-bound learning disabled high school students, to assess the college-related expectations of these students, and to compare these skills and expectations with those identified as essential by successful learning disabled college students. This information has implications for the development of college preparatory courses for learning disabled students.

Research Questions

1. What are the academic coping skills currently employed by college-bound learning disabled high school students?
2. What are the expectations of learning disabled college students regarding college experiences?
3. How do the coping skills and college-related expectations of the high school students compare to those of successful learning disabled college students?

## Methods

Subjects and Design

Subjects of this study were fifty-nine learning disabled high school students from two public and two private school programs. One public school serves an affluent suburban area while the other is primarily rural. Of the two private schools, one is a special day school for learning disabled students; the other is religiously affiliated and offers a full range of high school programs. Students were identified by self-report and teacher nomination as being college-bound.

Procedure

All subjects were given a high school modification of the CSEQ (College Student Experience Questionnaire). Students reported the frequency with which they employed various academic coping mechanisms in the areas of experiences with faculty, general course learning, and experiences in writing. In addition, all subjects were given a separate seven-part questionnaire which asked about their expectations regarding the use of special services in college and what academic difficulties they expected to encounter. A random selection of the subjects participated in a structured interview during which they

were asked to elaborate on academic coping skills used in high school and how high schools could better prepare them for college.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire and interview data were used to develop multi-dimensional profiles of both current coping behaviors and future expectations. Frequencies were used to calculate percentage score responses for each questionnaire item. Percentages were compared to those generated by successful learning disabled college students in a previous study (Kelly & Dietrich, 1993). Responses from the open-ended questions and interviews were analyzed for recurrent themes and emerging patterns.

## Results

The subjects in the study were 59 college-bound learning disabled high school students. All subjects reported plans to continue their education after high school graduation, the majority in four year colleges. The availability of alternative admissions and ancillary services for learning disabled students was a factor in college selection. Approximately 85% expected to use at least one type of ancillary service. Extended time for tests, tape recorded lectures and personal help from faculty were the three services chosen most frequently.

Academic Coping Skills

Academic coping skills were measured in three areas; experiences with faculty, general course learning and experiences in writing. Subjects initiated few contacts with faculty outside the classroom and over 50% had never talked with a counselor. Contacts with faculty were specified as making appointments, discussing classwork, or asking

advice about personal problems. Students did not access faculty in a structured manner, through appointments, depending instead on in-class time to discuss issues that might be relevant. This finding supports Vogel's (1993) premise that high school faculty is accessible on an informal level. Therefore learning disabled students may have no need to take the initiative for establishing formal contact (see Table 1, Appendix A).

Although subjects admitted having trouble with academic problems, their approach to learning appeared to be sporadic. Many did not apply consistent study techniques such as outlining, underlining major points or reading supplementary materials. Only 17% integrated ideas; only 14% summarized major points (see Table 2, Appendix A).

Use of specific strategies for writing followed a similar pattern. The prevailing strategy for writing was to complete a written assignment once. Papers were frequently written without the aid of a style manual, dictionary or thesaurus. Students tended to work independently. Despite their admitted problems with writing, 68% never asked for feedback from a teacher who had criticized their work (see Table 3, Appendix A).

Expectations for college

All but two subjects anticipated some academic problems in college. When asked why he anticipated having trouble with specific subjects in college, one student stated, "because I'm having trouble with them now." The three most common areas of concern were reading, mathematics and English. Reading problems were specifically defined as poor comprehension, slow rate and inadequate study skills. Difficulties with mathematics ranged from inability to perform simple

calculations to application of concepts. One student represented the response of many with the comment, "Even looking at a math book gives me a headache." Students reported difficulties in English which included spelling, grammar and writing. The written responses to open-ended questions displayed evidence of all three.

A clear pattern emerged in response to the question concerning what high schools could do to prepare learning disabled students for college. Students emphasized requirements to study, instruction in study skills and higher expectations for academic performance. They recognized a need to study harder, study more, study with more effort. Some listed specific study strategies such as access to another student's notes for clarification or development of individual study methods. One student expressed a need for "good study skills now. By college it is too late." They also felt that high school personnel should have more rigorous expectations for learning disabled students and require the students to take college preparatory courses rather than to "let them slack off."

Comparison to college students

In many areas the college expectations of learning disabled high school students were congruent with the perceptions of learning disabled students functioning successfully in college. Both groups identified extended time, tape recorded lectures and individual help from faculty as necessary for success in college. They also felt that high school programs should include study skills courses, provide more college preparatory content and foster independence in college-bound learning disabled students. However significant discrepancies between academic coping skill responses indicated that high school students do

not currently display adequate academic skills to meet their expectations. While successful college students consistently stressed the importance of putting forth extra effort, the low rate of responses in the "often" category indicated that high school students were not doing so (see Table 4, Appendix A).

## Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify the academic coping skills and college expectations of learning disabled high school students. These factors were also compared to recent study of successful learning disabled college students (Kelly & Dietrich, 1993). Learning disabled high school students reported inconsistent effort and inadequate use of compensatory skills. They are experiencing problems with reading, writing and mathematics and anticipate having similar problems in college. Their academic coping skills ranged from sporadic to absent. Although they made little effort to contact high school faculty, they expected to have individualized faculty help in college. While acknowledging a need to study, "more-harder-better", the subjects were not doing so at present. Especially significant was the lack of response in the "often" category regarding academic coping skills. This population needs to work more diligently and systematically in order to succeed academically, yet puts forth little effort on a consistent basis. The discrepancy between realistic expectations and inadequate coping behaviors is typical of many learning disabled students. Although they are able to intellectualize and articulate appropriate coping skills, they are unable to implement these behaviors without assistance. While their expectations are realistic in comparison with the college population, their present implementation is discrepant.

## Implications

The information from this study has practical implications for high school personnel responsible for the curriculum of learning disabled high school students. College-bound students need intensive instruction in study skills and strategies. Students need to be made accountable for the use of these study skills and expect consequences for failure to employ skills on a consistent basis. This pattern of structuring increased responsibility should be extended beyond study skills to other academic coping behaviors such as scheduling appointments with faculty members, using supplementary aids and applying prewriting techniques. The curriculum for those learning disabled high school students with college aspirations should reflect realistically rigorous preparation for college level courses.

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# APPENDIX A

Table 1

Learning Disabled High School Students' Experiences with Faculty

| | Often % | Sometimes % | Never % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Talked with a counselor | 9 | 39 | 53 |
| Made an appointment | 2 | 53 | 46 |
| Discussed personal problems | 9 | 49 | 42 |
| Discussed ideas for paper | 10 | 64 | 26 |
| Asked for comments on work | 19 | 61 | 20 |
| Visited after class | 12 | 68 | 20 |
| Asked for course related information | 27 | 68 | 5 |
| Held a conversation | 41 | 54 | 5 |

N=59

Table 2

Learning Disabled High School Students' Experiences in General Course Learning

| | Often % | Sometimes % | Never % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Made outlines | 7 | 41 | 53 |
| Did additional readings | 5 | 56 | 39 |
| Considered practical applications | 14 | 63 | 24 |
| Explained material to another student | 25 | 58 | 17 |
| Underlined major points | 25 | 59 | 15 |
| Tried to integrate ideas | 17 | 68 | 15 |
| Took detailed notes | 39 | 51 | 10 |
| Summarized major points | 14 | 80 | 6 |
| Worked on a paper which used several sources | 20 | 75 | 5 |
| Listened attentively | 39 | 56 | 5 |

N=59

Table 3

Learning Disabled High School Students' Experiences in Writing

| | Often % | Sometimes % | Never % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Talked with instructor who criticized a paper | 2 | 31 | 68 |
| Spent at least five hours writing a paper | 5 | 44 | 51 |
| Referred to a style manual | 20 | 47 | 32 |
| Asked an instructor for advice | 10 | 61 | 29 |
| Revised a paper at least twice | 14 | 59 | 27 |
| Asked others to read something you wrote | 32 | 49 | 19 |
| Wrote a rough draft | 32 | 53 | 15 |
| Used a dictionary or thesaurus | 17 | 71 | 12 |

N=59

Table 4

Survey Responses for Learning Disabled College and High School Students

| | Students | Often % | Sometimes % | Never % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experiences with Faculty | | | | |
| | College | 38 | 46 | 17 |
| | High School | 17 | 60 | 23 |
| Course Learning | | | | |
| | College | 56 | 35 | 8 |
| | High School | 21 | 61 | 18 |
| Writing Experiences | | | | |
| | College | 52 | 31 | 16 |
| | High School | 17 | 52 | 32 |

N=40 College
N=59 High School